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USAID FOR DCHA/OFDA GGOTTLIEB, PMORRIS; GH/KHILL, DCARROLL
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USDA FOR OSEC STUMP/PENN/LAMBERT/CAINE, FAS
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USEUCOM FOR ECJ4
VIENNA PASS APHIS
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FROM THE U.S. MISSION TO THE UN AGENCIES IN ROME

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: AVIAN INFLUENZA: FAO PRESS CONFERENCE PROVIDES
GLOBAL UPDATE (ON NIGERIA, AZERBAIJAN, IRAQ, AND
ITALY/GREECE)

REF: (A) 05 ROME 3949; (B) 05 ROME 3320; (C) 05 ROME 2979;
(D) 05 ROME 1142; (E) 05 ROME 3976; (F) 06 ROME 0087;
(G) 06 ROME 0000; (H) 06 UNROME 0315; (I) 06 UNROME 0430

1. On February 14, FAO held a press conference to provide a global update on Avian Influenza. Areas highlighted were Nigeria, Azerbaijan, Iraq, Europe in general (with a primary focus on Italy), and future preparations for Latin America/Caribbean. Samuel Jutzi, Director of FAO's Animal Production and Health Division, and Juan Lubroth, FAO Senior Veterinary Officer/Infectious Diseases, were joined by Romano Marabelli, Chief Veterinary Officer (CVO) for the Government of Italy. FAO officials commended Italy for taking extremely effective and rapid control measures and noted that there is no reason to panic in Europe at present, as European poultry is safe for consumption and the region is well prepared. Other remarks follow:

2. Nigeria: Jutzi opened by stating that FAO CVO Joseph Domenech, who was in Chad, was expected to travel to Nigeria on February 15 to assist the international assessment team already in place (reftel 06 UN ROME 0430). He also noted that the Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) is widely circulating in Nigerian commercial and rural poultry farms. Lubroth stated that Nigeria, followed by Iraq and Azerbaijan, is one of the most problematic areas presently. The Government of Nigeria, which had the foresight in November 2005 to set up an Avian Influenza presidential/ministerial level task force comprised of eight teams of veterinarians, epidemiologists and other specialists, is currently restricting the movement of poultry out of Kaduna and Kano states. When asked by a journalist why it took FAO so long to identify the H5N1 virus in Nigeria, Lubroth responded that, initially, experts believed they were dealing with Newcastle Disease (NCD) and HPAI was suspected only when commercial farmers reported the deaths of 40,000 chickens in early February. Jutzi also interjected that, even if FAO knows the virus is circulating, the organization cannot publicly reveal the information before the government formally acknowledges the virus' presence by reporting it to the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE).

3. When questioned whether there are suspected cases in other African countries, Lubroth responded that FAO tracks rumors on large animal die offs, and there are quite a few rumors FAO is tracking right now in Africa and around the world. However, it would be irresponsible of FAO to give out a list of countries before tests confirm suspicions and rule out whether animals died as a result of or were culled for a number of other diseases.

4. Azerbaijan: Lubroth stated that the FAO/OIE reference laboratory in Weybridge, United Kingdom, confirmed H5N1 in samples sent from the Baku area where nearly 200,000 migrating birds spend their winter. It is believed that the wild birds congregating around the Caspian Sea are responsible for spreading the virus to the Caucasus and Balkans.

5. Iraq: Lubroth stated that five districts in the north [Suleimaini (sp) province] are affected, with 130,000-180,000 birds being culled thus far in an effort to contain the spread. Authorities have set up monitoring teams, including a border patrol along the northern border with Turkey. All slaughterhouses have been closed except one.

Lubroth stated that early diagnosis of HPAI was a result of activities set up to detect NCD, which is now rampant in Iraq (Note: FAO has requested U.S. assistance to combat NCD there. End Note) The Iraqi Ambassador to FAO, who was in the audience, inquired whether anyone from FAO visited Iraq, noting that his ministry practically scolded him for not knowing this answer and not being more proactive with FAO. Lubroth reported that the FAO veterinary [Dr. Taliabi (sp)] based in Cairo was on mission there with the WHO team and that he is working closely with Sam Yinx (sp) of the U.S. Naval Medical Research Unit also based in Cairo (reftel 06 UN ROME 0430).

16. Latin America/Caribbean (LAC): Jutzi announced that, last week, FAO Director General Diouf released an additional \$2 million from FAO Technical Cooperation Program (TCP) funds to set up regional TCPs in Latin America. The TCP proposals, which are currently being developed by FAO, plan to include all countries and aim to restructure and improve veterinary networks and surveillance systems. When a Finnish Radio reporter asked whether FAO believed HPAI is a global problem currently, Jutzi replied that, although the virus is not yet present in LAC, FAO has been saying for over one year that this will be a global problem, and, therefore, must invest to improve networks there as well.

17. Europe in general: Jutzi stated that there is no reason to panic in Europe at present, as the problem is in birds, not humans, both in Greece and Italy. Europe has extensive surveillance and veterinary networks, and European poultry is safe to eat. Last summer, FAO warned of the real risk for Africa, but the real risk for Europe will be when wild birds start to migrate north later this spring/early summer. If the virus is as entrenched as it is in Africa, there will be a real risk to European poultry from the wild birds returning from Africa. As a matter of protection, FAO supported the move by some European countries to transfer poultry indoors and cover outside coops with anti-passerine nets. Historically, Europe's vast experience in dealing with transboundary animal diseases and its highly developed culture of early detection and response makes it extremely well prepared.

18. Lubroth stated that the risk to Europe is unknown and remains theoretical. FAO does not have a grasp yet on the reservoirs of the virus that, upon return to Europe, will infect European birds. As part of the regional TCPs set up in Africa, FAO is currently conducting studies on wild birds (congregating in Chad, for example) and hopes to know more in coming weeks. In response to an ANSA reporter's question on whether there is an increased risk of transmission to humans from urban species, such as pigeons, starlings, or swallows, which may interface with wild birds, Lubroth stated that the risk is pretty low, as the known reservoirs that shed in high quantities are related to the duck family and not to passerine family.

19. Italy: Italian CVO, Dr. Romano Marabelli, who was president of OIE International Committee, stated that Italian authorities have been actively monitoring as of last fall and, with the help of the renowned national laboratory in Padua, which happens to be an FAO/OIE reference laboratory, were able to positively identify H5N1 immediately in the dead swans found in Catania, Messina, Sicily, Calabria, Puglia and Lecce. Due to cold weather in the Balkans, these swans traveled south to warmer regions of Italy where they introduced the virus. Italian authorities took appropriate (EU-standard) measures by monitoring areas and blocking the movement of poultry. Currently, authorities are keeping a close watch on all affected areas.

10. In response to questions by local and foreign journalists, Marabelli stated that there is no proof the virus has been transmitted to domesticated animals, as all tests have come back negative. The Government of Italy (GOI) task force will increase its monitoring of swans. He clarified that the HPAI virus in wild birds such as swans cannot be transmitted directly to humans; rather, the virus requires a vector as an intermediary. He also noted that WHO has not yet declared a pandemic and, therefore, has not identified a virus for which a vaccine must be developed, but the GOI has made plans to obtain 36 million doses. At the moment, however, the UN (WHO/FAO) focus should be on reducing the level of risk in Africa. He also stated that the GOI issued a directive to all mayoral offices last fall to carry out a census on backyard poultry farms. As a result, many small farmers have put up anti-passerine nets over breeding grounds. Currently, Italian authorities are focusing their attention on farms in areas where wild swans were found and continuously check and recheck family farms, but have not yet come across the virus at any of these farms.

11. USMISSION UN ROME will continue to cover and widely

disseminate information on FAO activities to combat and control Avian Influenza.

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